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The manufacture of transit

Border control, urban trends and migrant trajectories in Nouadhibou (Mauritania)

Abstract. This chapter examines different forms of migrant integration in Nouadhibou, Mauritania. In this town, the activities developed by transit migrants have been integrated in the local economic network, which is largely articulated around the activities of waves of earlier migrants that have been instilled with a renewed dynamism by newcomers. Since the implementation of border surveillance measures in 2006, transit migration has been identified as the target of specific (police and humanitarian) practices assigned to specific actors. Within a matter of years, these mechanisms have produced an entirely new universe of people, practices, places, and technologies gravitating around “illegal” migration, and have also highlighted the situation of presumed “illegals” (either by stigmatizing them or by defending them). As a category of migration management developed in expert discourses, “transit migration” has produced the category of “transit” migrants, thus spelling the end of a conception of migration in which transitory residence was just one feature among others of migrant presence within the town.

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This chapter examines different forms of migrant integration in Nouadhibou, Mauritania. Nouadhibou owes its distinctiveness to the history of its urban development and its position on “migration routes”¹. Unlike other countries affected by the externalisation of migration management, Mauritania is only viewed as a transit country². The main purpose of the measures taken by the EU (and the required cooperation of its partners in accordance with the policy of cooperation defined in the Rabat declaration) is to impede the passage of migrants

¹ The reason for putting the phrase ‘migration routes’ in inverted commas is that the notion (and the status it assigns to specific areas or places) is an integral part of the discursive apparatus underlying the unification and legitimization of European migration policies.

² Note however that the Black-African component of Mauritania’s population has a long history of emigration to France.

of all origins transiting via the country by controlling the country's land borders and maritime borders towards Europe. Since the massive wave of migrations on pirogues in late 2005, Nouadhibou has been earmarked as a strategic location for testing the implementation of new border control measures (Carrera, 2007) and inter-state cooperation policies. The new measures include police cooperation using mixed patrol units as part of the Seahorse and Atlantis programmes, the Frontex programme (Hera II, starting in the summer of 2006), a new detention centre in Nouadhibou, and legal cooperation aimed at reinforcing migration legislation to regulate entries and exits³ (Streiff-Fénart & Poutignat 2009).

In the last decade, the reputation of Nouadhibou as a transit town coupled with the enforcement of border control measures assigned to specific towns have considerably increased the visibility of the populations targeted by the new measures – i.e. “transit migrants”. This is not merely a reference to the effects of the new surveillance and refoulement measures automatically generating increasing numbers of migrants by retaining candidates for migration in a “net” (Migreurop) or holding them in a “cul-de-sac” (Choplin 2005). Though useful for underlining the constraints exerted by migration policies on “thwarted mobilities” (Le Herou 2007), such views are misleading if they are taken literally. The majority of migrants using Nouadhibou as a point of departure usually remain in the town only for very limited periods. Candidates for migration tend to transit via Nouadhibou before heading for Europe on pirogues. If they fail to reach Europe, migrants head for other destinations (Nouakchott, Dakar, Morocco) or travel back and forth between these destinations. Those who stay in Nouadhibou for longer periods (in some cases several years) do so not because they are “blocked” (in the literal sense of the term⁴) but because they have found a niche – i.e. a job opportunity that has caused them to delay their plans, and in some cases to abandon them altogether.

The focus of this chapter is not the quantitative growth of migrant populations so much as their emergence as a new urban category. This chapter will examine more specifically how an abstract classificatory category (i.e. the notion of transit defined a decade ago by international agencies) has been “realized”⁵ in practice in a particular context: through funding networks (e.g. European invitations to tender, funding from foundations or international agencies) resulting in action programmes (dissuasion campaigns, training and assistance measures); by the creation of networks of actors (state agents, international experts, NGOs, local associations) connected via these programmes by cooperation, competition or customer relations; or through landmarks of migration located in the urban landscape (for example a detention centre known as ‘Guantanamo’ – a term coined by the immigrants themselves – is slowly emerging as an urban toponym).

To fully measure its scope and significance, the situation borne of the measures aimed at monitoring populations and controlling migrant movements needs to be viewed in its proper

³ Mauritania has been far more reluctant on this point. Two bills have nevertheless been submitted to the ministerial cabinet relating to entry and residence permits and to the right of asylum.

⁴ A transit situation is a situation in which individuals feel psychologically blocked wherever they may be.

⁵ The term is used in roughly the same sense as Bourdieu's use of the term ‘realize’ in speaking of the category of “family”: the principle of the construction of a collective reality which sustains a social fiction as a reality insofar as it is collectively recognized (Bourdieu, 1993).

urban context – i.e. in the context of a town that has built its power as an economic capital on population movements related to labor. Since its creation by the administrators of French West Africa in 1906 under the name Port-Etienne, the urbanization of Nouadhibou has been founded on diverse populations involved in industrial, craft and service activities not provided by local populations, of nomadic and trading traditions. French administrators, Senegalese skirmishers, and fishermen and traders from the Canary Islands during the first period of urbanization were succeeded by labor migrations after the creation of Miferma in 1952 and the mineral port exporting iron extracted from the mines of Zouerate, by Russian, Korean and Chinese companies in industrial fishing, and by West African migrants involved in urban trades (construction, transport, catering, mechanics, cleaning, domestic services) (Acloque 2002, Bonte 2001).

As a result of constantly renewed migration flows in Mauritania, Nouadhibou has developed an image of a town particularly well-suited to lucrative business activities. Today its reputation has spread beyond the country's borders. Migrant movements have tended to involve both foreigners, particularly those involved in fishing (Senegalese, Malians, Ghanaians, Bissau Guineans...) and nationals, including Wolof fishermen from N'diogo (Dia 2001), workers in the mining industry from the river region recruited during the colonial period (known during the Miferma era as the “displaced”), and state employees, who have tended to define themselves as “deported” pending their reassignment in the capital. The multiple forms of migrant circulation are reflected by equally multiple ways of “being foreign”. One of the most distinctive characteristics of Nouadhibou is that it has been a migrant town since its inception, i.e. an intermediate place operating as a crossroads for a wide variety of migrant trajectories, though rarely an ending point (Poutignat & Streiff-Fénart 2001). Migrant trajectories include migrants transiting towards Europe, who began to view Nouadhibou as a potential place of transit in the 1980s, though not as commonly used as others (Barden 1993).

Migrants staying for longer periods in Nouadhibou pending an opportunity to travel on a fishing boat, to journey across the Sahara towards Morocco or (more recently) to leave on a pirogue have become a familiar urban figure in the last twenty years. The aim of many young men from Sub-Saharan Africa transiting via Nouadhibou is to “find the way”. The term “adventurer” has been used to describe these migrants since the early 1990s, a label clearly in evidence on a “letter-box for adventurers” on the door of the Catholic mission (Poutignat & Streiff-Fénart 2001).

The activities developed by transit migrants have been integrated in the local economic network, which is largely articulated around the activities of waves of earlier migrants that have been instilled with a renewed dynamism by newcomers. This is particularly the case of traditional fishing and related activities. Since the 1990s, the presence of migrants has proved decisive for the development of informal economic activities based around fish processing (particularly the production of dried salted fish or fermented fish).

A historically minor activity sometimes left to fishermen's wives, fish processing was recently given a new lease of life by pioneers (Nigerians and Ghanaians) intent on promoting

species not exploited by local factories exporting towards the foreign European market and destined for the domestic African market. In Nouadhibou, the fish processing centre is located in an area called Bûntiyya, situated near the traditional port and fishermen's quarter of La Charca (see photo 1). Both the urban space and the activities carried out in the area have to some extent been appropriated by "foreigners". The term refers (and this is precisely what makes the area so unique and distinctive) to a wide range of foreigners, from large-scale merchants who are long-term residents and have sometimes become national citizens to contract-men offering their labor on a daily basis pending their passage to Europe. The only reason why Bûntiyya has been appropriated by foreigners is that the activities carried out in the area have been left to migrants. A dirty, foul-smelling activity, fish processing has been largely abandoned by the native population, who may nevertheless derive a range of benefits from tolerating fish exploitation by foreigners – from various levies (soldiers regularly transit via the area to claim baksheesh) to the compulsory joint venture for business activities of any size, an obligation that must be complied with to avoid immediate sanction (which generally involves the offender having to leave the town).

Though it is a fragile operation subject at any point to potential evictions, Bûntiyya has become a centre of intense immigrant circulation in the last twenty years. Migrant movements in this area are based on overlapping migrant trajectories at different levels of the production process. Beyond the traditional cross-border production of *guedj* and well-established markets (such as shark fins exported to Asia controlled by Malian-Mauritanian joint ventures), the initiatives of adventurers have proved decisive in the development of the production and exportation of selachians (skates and sharks), which had previously remained confined to Nouakchott. In some cases, the commercial initiatives developed by migrants have even generated new markets (developed for instance by Nigerians) by bringing together potential buyers, spaces and resources in new and unexpected ways. For example, having noted how closely related a species of small sharks (called *tollo*) exploited in the Canary Islands appeared to be to a luxury product consumed in Nigeria by the higher classes, a handful of Nigerian adventurers set out to process and market the product as a cheap substitute on the Nigerian market (see photo 2).

Within a matter of years, Bûntiyya has become a transnational market place in the informal economy, largely as a result of the availability of cheap labor (precisely because migrants are merely transiting through the area), but also because the "adventurers" providing such labor have been able to alter their projects and to reinvest their earnings by becoming involved in the "fish business" (see the contribution of Poutignat in this volume). The values of the "adventurer" (a taste for risk, the determination to pursue an objective, a spirit of initiative, the courage to face danger, the ability to make sacrifices in order to accumulate capital and resources) are easily converted into the typically aggressive and innovative characteristics of the Schumpeterian entrepreneur. Bûntiyya has precisely been the site of such conversion for certain adventurers.

While very few migrants are successful and remain in business on a permanent basis, risk-taking strategies can be beneficial for those able to call on relations and funds in their country of origin. The success of these migrants gives substance to the imaginary figure of the

transnational entrepreneur (Peraldi 2002) who, alongside other figures (such as the figure of the footballer), symbolizes the hope of attaining a new status and reinforces the idea that Nouadhibou is the right place to achieve this goal.

The specific interest of Bûntiyya is that it highlights the particular type of urban cosmopolitanism that is characteristic of Nouadhibou within the confines of a small and clearly delimited space – i.e. the cosmopolitanism of a crossroads town of great mobility where dynamic business activities and work relations are built on embedded and overlapping migration trajectories. Because migrant projects may shift and change at any time, it may be difficult to draw a distinction between migrant workers, migrant traders and transit migrants.

As a result of the EU measures implemented in 2006 to reinforce “management capabilities” as part of the control of illegal migration in Mauritania, transit migration has been identified as the target of specific (police and humanitarian) practices assigned to specific actors. Following the introduction of new border surveillance measures, highly visible actors have begun to appear in town: coastguards and policemen from the Guardia Civil patrolling on speedboats and helicopters. The deployment of repressive measures has also been accompanied by the arrival of an entire fleet of international NGOs (Red Cross, Croissant Rouge, and Médecins du Monde) that have taken over the issue of humanitarian aid.

More recently, members of Mauritania’s civil society have also become involved in defending so-called “illegal” migrants⁶. Since the creation of a detention centre in Nouadhibou, the Mauritanian Association of Human Rights (AMDH), which had never previously worked in the town, and the Association for the Protection of the Environment and Humanitarian Action (APEAH), which had previously been specialized in environmental issues and the defence of refugees, have taken an active part in the defence or support of immigrants, alongside the Catholic Church and community associations. The latter had previously defended the interests of migrants indiscriminately, i.e. irrespective of their specific migrant status. Unlike what has tended to prevail in other contexts (for instance in Bamako), the individuals in charge of associations representing different communities (grouped under the leadership of Caritas within a federation) are often migrant adventurers who have abandoned their project more or less definitively, with a status halfway between association leader and president of a ghetto (Pian 2008, Laacher 2007) – hence the disappointment of the IOM, which, in an attempt to organize a meeting to encourage associations to join a programme of voluntary return, discovered that the associations themselves were “involved in illegal immigration” (interview with the senior representative of the IOM in Nouakchott, July 2007).

The Catholic Mission counts a very small number of labor migrants among its flock. It has been working for many years to provide help and assistance to migrant adventurers. The migrant statuses of their target audience are nevertheless uncertain. The Mission itself

⁶ In other words, migrants who are not necessarily illegal in Mauritania but are presumed to be illegal on the basis of the intention that is ascribed to them, or in the case of migrants who are refused entry, the status of illegal migrant which would have been assigned to them elsewhere if they had been successful in their effort to migrate beyond Mauritania.

contributes to the reversibility of migrant trajectories, by offering jobs to the most highly qualified adventurers (trainers, cooks, secretarial work) and by providing migrants with a degree of stability for the duration of their stay in Nouadhibou. During celebrations, long-term immigrants, who represent its mainstay and are often settled “adventurers” (with wife and children), rub shoulders with transit migrants in town only for the duration of mass.

The practices and discourses of the new actors providing aid and assistance to immigrants (AMDH and APAH) are indicative of the rapid changes (since 2006) that have reconfigured the migration issue. Because of their connections with global networks defending undocumented and deported immigrants (Migreurop, Cimade) or the funding they receive from transnational agencies or NGOs (HCR, NGO OSIWA Soros Foundation), these associations tend to adopt the globalized management lexicon or militant vocabulary of organizations specializing in international migration. Locally, the meanings of migration are reinterpreted as the fight against illegal migration or the defence of Human Rights. In so doing, they contribute to a more general process of designation of transit migrants, identifying them (through terms such as “clandestines”, “illegals”, “transit migrants”, “undocumented”) as a specific problem or cause, and extracting their situation from the general condition of immigrants.

The denial of the rights of foreigners was common in Nouadhibou well before the town was identified as one of the main transit areas of illegal migrants heading for Europe. The local authorities had begun to enforce regular deportation procedures under pressure from the EU as early as the mid 1990s, though fairly leniently (as illustrated by the many jokes implying that the deported migrants returned to Nouadhibou before the policemen in charge of deporting them). The very same authorities occasionally resorted to particularly tough methods for expelling undesirable migrants, as illustrated in 2003 by the case of a Cameroonian national expelled for having levelled accusations at several businessmen and the Mauritanian government in a report broadcast on the French television channel FR3.

Though a less spectacular trend, immigrants have also been the target of all sorts of levies and “inconveniences” that have become so routine that the easiest and least damaging ways of complying have become part and parcel of the basic know-how of immigrants (i.e. shared knowledge of the basics that newcomers learn quickly on the advice of longer-established migrants) – for instance that it may sometimes be useful to remind the Moors of the presence in their own country of tradesmen who are just as likely to be the target of harassment; that it is unnecessary and dangerous to appeal to the justice system to obtain compensation for any harm suffered at the hands of an unfair employer or owner; or that migrants need to be able to recognize the point beyond which customs officers, the police or the military should not go (for example agreeing to give 500 *oughia*⁷, but not 1000).

Following the measures implemented under EU pressure in 2006, the number of police controls has significantly increased, enhancing the precarity of the conditions of migrant residence and transit. 6000 people were thus held in a detention centre in 2006. The same year, Mauritania expelled 11,637 migrants. There is a widespread feeling among migrants

⁷ The currency of Mauritania.

that their relations with the local population have deteriorated significantly⁸. There is also a sense of increasing hostility towards migrants (even among long-term settlers), while newcomers frequently complain of a lack of respect shown towards them by native Mauritians. Though hardly meriting the top prize for hospitality (a distinction that goes unquestionably to Mali), Mauritania had previously been considered to be one of the more welcoming countries. The Catholic mission has even been forced to abandon its traditional trip to the beach because the procession of a group of Sub-Saharan walkers led by the local priest was recently mistaken for a meeting between illegal immigrants and smugglers. Locals can also be seen applauding cars returning expelled migrants to the border.

Beyond the matter of migrants' declining living conditions, the more general issue is the redefinition of the local representations (based on social tolerance and economic complementarity) that have been reconfigured politically as a "migration issue" determined by external European objectives.

Despite the suddenness of recent developments, there is no evidence of any direct connection with the influx of candidates for migration in the town since the end of 2005. The presence of young Sub-Saharan migrants, wandering in town or gathering in front of Western Union branches, has generated instead a mixture of curiosity and compassion rather than hostility. In March 2006, a migrant from the Ivory Coast even underlined the good relations between immigrants on the one hand and the authorities and the local population on the other:

When that thing happened in Nouadhibou (i.e. the increasing number of migrants leaving on pirogues), I have to say that the police and the gendarmes didn't really bother the foreigners at all [...] They tried to control the seashore, where young people got aboard, but they certainly didn't put any pressure on us or grab us in broad daylight [...] When all that fuss was going on, no one bothered us. Here the Mauritanian people I know, have actually been giving us advice, saying things like: "that's not good, you'll die, try to work here, it'll be ok, it'll work out", so you see they encouraged us, saying things like: "it'll be difficult, but try and work, there's oil coming, that'll bring in some money".

The changing representation of migrants was further driven by the introduction of new police methods. Despite the declining number of departures as a result of tougher controls⁹, the EU kept up its pressure on Mauritania, a country known for its leniency. In the absence of *flagrante delicto*, preventative arrests (i.e. raids in households, arrests on the street at night) became standard practice in order to maintain the high numbers of expulsions and deportations. According to unconfirmed rumours circulating among immigrants, raids tend to occur when the number of detainees at Guantanamo declines below a certain threshold, and there are even suggestions that money changes hands between the Spanish authorities and the Mauritanian police in an effort to reach official targets. The emergence of new police practices has had several significant consequences. It has generated new possibilities in a

⁸ Based on first-hand accounts collected during a period of research spent in Nouadhibou in March 2007.

⁹ But also probably as a result of the moratorium on fishing, which makes it impossible for pirogues to pass unnoticed among fishing boats.

specific sector of the transit economy, the extortion market, and has increased the number of potential beneficiaries. According to several testimonies, the threats of denunciation have developed significantly and are no longer the sole prerogative of police employees.

Because of the close cohabitation of labor migrants and adventure migrants in Nouadhibou, the most significant impact of the new procedures is that preventative arrests are applied indiscriminately to all immigrants, to the point of threatening settled immigrants (including long-term settlers) with the possibility of police harassment, which was not intended in theory to be directed at them.

It's a real problem, because they can't see the difference. They just don't understand. That's what wears us down. They arrest people in their own homes because of illegal migrants. It's just not right. (Account given by a Malian immigrant who has worked as a driver in Nouadhibou for ten years¹⁰)

In addition to stigmatizing transit migrants or “clandestine” or “illegal” migrants (which they are often not), the recent measures have also undermined intra-community solidarity. While police officers are incapable of operating a selection using nothing more than the sole criterion of the intention to leave, the members of the community are by contrast “in the know”.

The problem is that the workers and the people who leave live in the same place. In homes with 8 or 9 bedrooms, there'll be 2 or 3 bedrooms with people who want to leave. Instead of arresting the people in the two bedrooms, they'll arrest everyone. If you tell them who you are, they won't listen. We know, because they're our fellow countrymen, but the police don't bother to make the distinction.

The danger that the foreign population as a whole will become contaminated with the stigma of the targeted category has arisen in a political context marked by rising nationalist sentiments recommending (among others things) the “Mauritanization of jobs”. The winner of the most recent general elections, General Azziz, is in the process of developing a new state discourse that has been described by his political opponents as “populist”. The fishing sector provides an illustration of the new discourse, with certain species banned for export in order to preserve them for national consumption. A more recent consequence of the rise of nationalist tendencies is the priority given to national citizens in jobs, leading the government to reactivate the measures of the *Code du Travail* (labor law). These measures, which have yet to be enforced, require foreigners to hold a work permit.

The January 27 2009 issue of *Le Calame* published a report that claimed that an inspection carried out by the Ministry of Mining in the gold mines of Adjouj found that fifteen foreign workers (for the most part Ghanaians) were present on the site, “in violation of the measures relating to visas, work permits and staff qualification”. The increasing number of inspections in the fishing sector (particularly in fish factories that employ large numbers of Senegalese

¹⁰ This account and all subsequent quotes were collected during a period of research in Nouadhibou in July 2009.

workers) is designed to remind factory managers that a work permit is an absolute requirement for employing foreign workers.

The increasingly hard line taken by the state on labor legislation has been reflected in new institutional discourses and practices (training, positions adopted by unions) concerning the rights of migrant workers. However, the manner in which the new practices have been implemented is not altogether unambiguous. For instance, while awareness campaigns have been addressed exclusively to migrants (who are urged to register and to turn down any job without a contract, to file a complaint if they suffer a wrong at the hands of their employer), migrant workers are totally deprived of the power to enforce their rights. Attempts to promote the status and identity of migrant worker hardly resonate among migrants, who (despite being very hard workers) rarely seek to be identified as workers not least because many of them live in a state of indetermination – either because they view their situation as a form of temporary exile or because work is merely a transitional period before their passage to Europe or a conversion to a trading or entrepreneurial status.

Indetermination is precisely the issue that is challenged by the risk of contamination, as illustrated by the following extract taken from an interview with the President of the APEAH discussing the deteriorating conditions of immigrants in the town:

All immigrants are considered to be suspects, and what's even worse is that arrests tend to be made purely on the basis of physical appearance – so if you see someone who looks like they might be from Ghana or Sierra Leone, you arrest them, you grab them off the street, and you say they're an illegal migrant. In fact, the President of the Malians gave an example of this during training. He told us that he knew Malians who were serious and earnest and had come here to work and who were arrested on the street and expelled although they hadn't come here on their way to somewhere else.

The search for illegal migrants and the suspicion hanging over Sub-Saharan foreigners as a whole have increased the tendency to give greater substance to the transit migrant category and to demarcate transit migration from 'virtuous' labor migration in order to preserve the legitimacy of the latter. The division of the immigrant population into two distinct categories which had previously been closely intertwined, i.e. settled migrants and clandestines or illegals, between those migrating "to find work" and those migrating for other reasons, has become imbued with moral values: the values of labor migrant (earnest, honest) as opposed to the values of the migrant adventurer, viewed as idle, a potential delinquent, and even irreligious because, given the potentially lethal risks of their undertaking, adventurers challenge the condemnation of suicide by the revealed religions¹¹.

The tendency to stigmatize illegal immigrants has not (so far?) resulted in xenophobic press campaigns such as those carried out in Morocco (Pian 2009). The migration issue in

¹¹ A document on illegal migrations in Mauritania commissioned by the Soros Foundation recommended the enrolment of imams in dissuasion campaigns (*Les tendances migratoires clandestines en Afrique de l'Ouest*, Open Society Initiative for West Africa, 2008, p.69).

Mauritania has not fully entered the public sphere because it has never been instrumentalized in election campaigns (including the most recent campaign in 2009). Both the press in Nouakchott and the local press in Nouadhibou only devote a limited and relatively benevolent space to the issue of illegal immigration. More than migrants, independent newspapers denounce the violation of human rights, the complicity of state agents with smugglers, and the seizure of the possessions of “clandestines” for their own personal use (particularly mobile phones). One journalist observed recently: “why aren’t possessions simply returned to the illegal migrants or to the leaders of their respective communities? After all, nobody has ever claimed that the pursuit of happiness in a foreign land was a crime”.

The effects of the stigmatization of transit migrants have been felt more strongly in specific forms of organization developed among migrants than in the Mauritanian public sphere. One significant (and so far unique) example is the Malian community, the largest migrant community along with the Senegalese community (approximately 5000 to 6000 migrants in Nouadhibou). In a community in which adventure migrations have added to established labor migration trends, transiting immigrants tend to cohabit in large collective hostels (holding up to 500 people) with their fellow countrymen, whose familiar presence on the urban landscape is the product of traditional networks of local West-African migrations. The association representing their interests devotes its energies to reception and cultural and leisure activities, and is closely connected with the Ministry of Malian expatriates. It plays a quasi diplomatic role of representation and negotiation with the local authorities and provides protection to all Malian nationals.

The association has been rivalled since early 2009 by a new association claiming 700 members. The initiator of the new association, a well-educated and enterprising young businessman, presents himself as the defender of the interests of young people keen to take responsibility for their own lives and to claim their rights against older migrants deemed to be not sufficiently aggressive. The new association has sought to demarcate itself from the older association, described as “stodgy” and traditional. Its objective is to attract sponsors in order to fund concerts, gala dinners, and conferences aimed at promoting an image of foreigners as diligent, honest and well-integrated workers, far from the established stereotypes of illegal migration. The bylaws of the association include the obligation to ensure that official documents are in order and to register with the police, and not to defend fellow countrymen suspected of being illegal migrants or delinquents.

Now they don't draw any distinction between those who leave and those who come here to work. So our association wants to ensure that a clear distinction is made between illegal migrants and migrants [...] If somebody is caught red-handed, if you commit a crime, we won't defend you.

Under the air of a conflict of generations between ancients and moderns, old and young, another purpose of the attempt to “modernize” the association system is to introduce new arrangements in a system of transactions long-established in Mauritania and Africa more generally (Olivier de Sardan 1996). While the formalization of the immigrant worker status

recommended by the association may serve to restrict the level of corruption in local authorities (racketeering, bribery, baksheesh), it can also be used for the purposes of paternalist practices of patronage that benefit the most affluent and longest-established migrants. It is no coincidence that the president is also the managing director of a brokerage company and that the honorary president of the association is the oldest Malian to have made his fortune in the fin trade. The president has made no attempt to conceal his objectives for regulating the recruitment and placing of workers by establishing himself as an intermediary in the main employment sectors for Malians – i.e. domestic services and traditional fishing. In traditional fishing, the issue in the long term is the constitution of permanent teams of workers organized in the same company, taking over from migrant adventurers, who represent at the moment the bulk of the contract men (the status of day laborer being, as noted above, well suited to their mobility, prepared as they are to move from one day to the next).

We have the labor, people who are willing to work and who are fit, serious and healthy. (President)

The company's aim to implement formal mechanisms for regulating the migrant labor market (an unprecedented measure in Nouadhibou) is congruent with the injunctions of the IOM and of the EU to modernize migration law and with the ambition of the State to restructure the labor market, particularly in the fishing sector. The company has also been given the approval of NGOs that recommend the legal formalization of work contracts to eradicate arbitrary treatment and exploitation, common issues in the informal sector.

There's already been some progress in the Malian community, since they have a representative which all employers have to deal with and who centralizes everything. So if you need a servant, you phone the representative. Say I need a woman or a man for such and such a job. You go to see the representative, you tell him what you need and he gets you the person you need. It's just these kinds of practices that we're actively promoting. (APEAH President)

Further evidence of the recent efforts to formalize regulation practices among immigrant groups is provided by the development of a new market, which, though smaller than in Nouakchott, is beginning to emerge in Nouadhibou: the market of "projects" aimed at the management of immigration. The issue of competition for access to resources is raised by the emergence of actors positioning themselves on the tender market for study programmes on the situation of "illegals" or information or "awareness" campaigns (on AIDS, the dangers of illegal emigration, the rights of immigrants). The new Malian association has again prefigured recent changes by forging links with the APEAH, which has placed it in pole position for the redistribution of this potential source of funding. But other associations who are now beginning to be in a position to be solicited as intermediaries are also starting to claim their share. In its July 2009 meeting (attended by the author), the federation of associations of foreigners included the definition of internal bylaws on its agenda designed to specify the form of cooperation with NGOS and sponsors "taking account of all the communities".

The new association of Malians and its president could be viewed as prefiguring recent developments that have combined to demarcate labor migrations from transit migrations: the implementation of strategies aimed at limiting the spread of the stigma of illegality; the initiatives aimed at regulating and formalizing labor immigration; the development of a market for the provision of surveys and migration awareness programs in which settled migrants are placed by NGOs and the international agencies serving as intermediaries for those among their fellow countrymen suspected of being illegal migrants.

Conclusion

The particular interest of the case of Nouadhibou is the sheer speed of the changes observed in the town following the introduction of European border control mechanisms implemented since 2006.

Within a matter of years, these mechanisms have produced an entirely new universe of people, practices, places, and technologies gravitating around “illegal” migration, and have also highlighted the situation of presumed “illegals” (either by stigmatizing them or by defending them). As a category of migration management developed in expert discourses, “transit migration” has produced the category of “transit” migrants, thus spelling the end of a conception of migration in which transitory residence was just one feature among others of migrant presence within the town.

In addition to other recent developments, this has resulted in changes which, beyond (or through) illegal immigration, have gradually affected all of the relations between immigrants and the local society. In keeping with its role as “economic capital”, the urban model of Nouadhibou was characterized by a marked degree of ideological continuity between the spirit of entrepreneurship and migration (whether labor migration or adventure migration). The currently prevailing situation is underpinned by a systematic distinction between the local population and immigrants, but also between different types of immigrants (settled and transit migrants) insofar as even the settled migrants (or at least some of them) have contributed significantly to the selection process.

It remains to ask what generalizable conclusions might be drawn from this distinctly monographic study. It is important to note first of all that the monographic aspect of this study is an inherent feature of the phenomenon under study. The externalisation policy is implemented differently according to the position of southern countries on migration routes and the objectives assigned to them within the partnership (i.e. “keeping people at home or immobilizing them en route”, Morice 2008). The opening of the legal labor market to contingents of nationals in Mali and Senegal (viewed as sending countries) is at the heart of the bargaining process. In other cases, the chief issue may be the quest for recognition by the state on the international stage, such as Libya but also Mauritania (since the coup d’état of August 2005).

The categories and key lines of argument used by European states and international agencies to conceptualize the migration issue and to justify their actions do not represent a homogeneous and hegemonic discourse. The agents in charge of implementing these policies

have tended to draw the relevant elements from their discursive repertoire to suit the requirements of a specific national and local context, giving actors (i.e. states, civil society, associations, economic operators) the freedom to reinterpret them on the basis of endogenous social logics and issues.

Because of its reputation as a country without a “legal culture”, the externalization of illegal migration control in Mauritania was immediately accompanied by a legal debate centring on the necessity of border control (rights of entry and exit) and the protection of vulnerable groups (Human Rights)¹². The legal lexicon provides a code used by the entire range of actors concerned at some level with illegal migration to account for the practices governed by different (even conflicting) logics: pressures aimed at the elaboration of migration legislation tallying with the “instruments of migration management” by international agencies; the constitution of a civil society which (beyond the matter of immigration) fights for the creation of a democratic civil society in Mauritania that is respectful of human rights; the development of a sector devoted to training and awareness programmes for the “rights of migrants” offering new opportunities to a small proportion of qualified nationals; and the creation of labor legislation to monitor labor sectors and the distribution of jobs by areas of economic activity.

A comparison (however superficial) with other contexts shows how this policy has tended to focus on different types of action. For example in Dakar (see Pian), the focus on dissuasion campaigns, which is almost completely absent in Nouadhibou¹³, produces other opportunities and specific strategies for the appropriation of resources : the deportee associations aim to promote the experience of adventure as an expert skill that can be negotiated on the market of illegal migration management (i.e. “*We know*”).

Finally, the conditions governing the implementation of these policies in Nouadhibou and the reorientations or emphases to which they are subject clearly depend on relations forged between the immigrants and local native populations in the history of the town and the changes linked to urban development.

It might therefore be argued that it is precisely the flexibility of the normative framework in which the problems and solutions of illegal migration are articulated that determines the unique efficiency of control policies. The articulation of the general discourse around a small number of loosely connected themes (co-development, dissuasion, the fight against trafficking, good governance) gives a marked degree of lability to the programmes designed to implement them. The result is the emergence of working misunderstandings in context adapted to every specific case: by embedding discursive categories of the globalized repertoire of migration management (transit, illegals) in local practices and issues, the case of

¹² The authors of an IOM document on Mauritania’s migration profile bemoaned “the general lack of recognition at a regional level of texts relating to the right of entry and exit and to residence permits for foreign nationals, as well as texts concerning the protection of vulnerable categories, including refugees, victims of human trafficking, unaccompanied children, etc”.

¹³ Note however that a Mauritanian Association for the Fight against Illegal Immigration was created recently in Nouakchott by members of “civil society”. Its purpose is to carry out campaigns aimed at raising awareness of the dangers of illegal migration (Mohammed-Saleh 2008).

Nouadhibou shows how the same categories can be viewed as predictive of the phenomena to which they refer because of such misunderstandings, and result in them becoming reality.

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